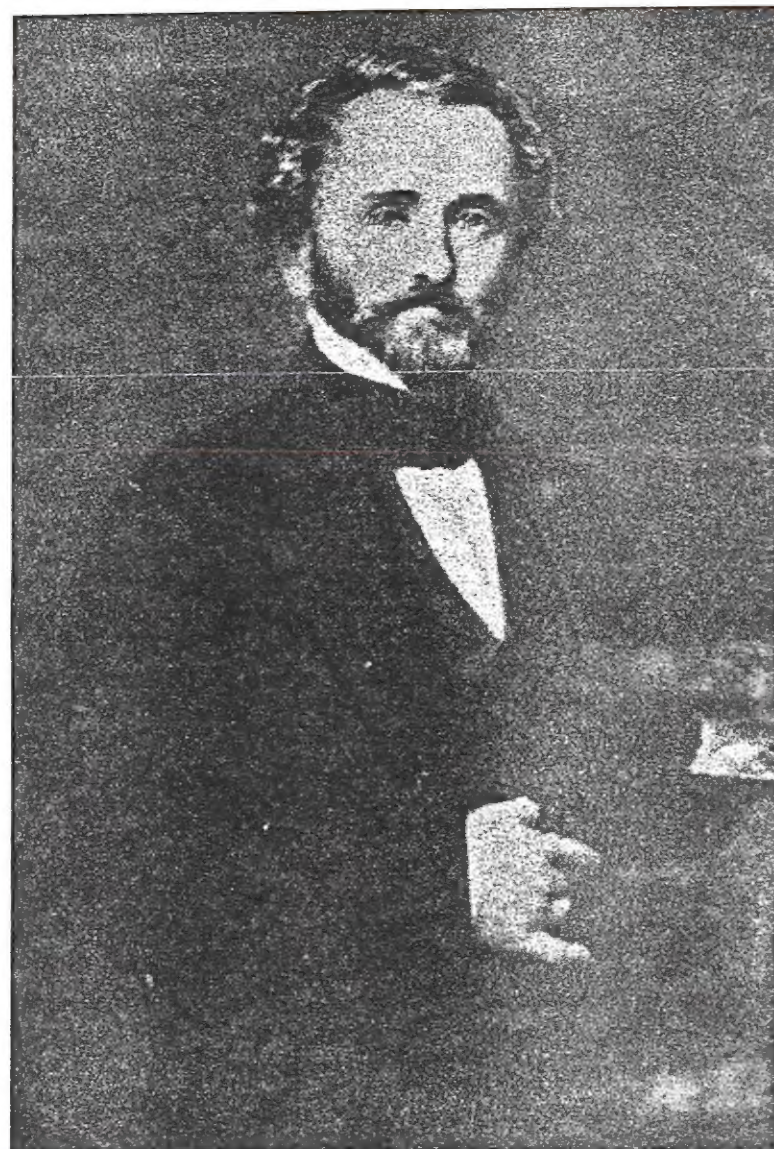


5 May 1846



WILLIAM H. RUSSELL

Leader of a large emigrating company in 1846
Founder of the Pony Express

FROM "THE OVERLAND MAIL," BY HAFEN

Need maps of Wm H Russell
Party

VII

THE WILLIAM H. RUSSELL PARTY

AMONG the first wagon trains to leave Independence in the spring of 1846 was one under the leadership of Col. William H. Russell, a gentleman who had been in the legislature of Kentucky, a friend of Henry Clay, and who later operated the Pony Express. Col. Russell's party left Independence on May 5, and was joined a few days later by Edwin Bryant.³⁷ On May 19 nine wagons from Illinois under the leadership of George and Jacob Donner and James F. Reed joined this train, making 46 wagons in all. Samuel C. Young and George Harlan were also invited to become members of this party, but declined, stating that it was already too large; they traveled by themselves a few days in advance. The Donner brothers were moderately wealthy farmers; James F. Reed was a veteran of the Black Hawk war, having served in the same company with Abraham Lincoln and James Clyman. Jesse Boone, a grandson of Daniel Boone, and Judge J. Quinn Thornton, later first supreme judge of Oregon, were also members of this train.

Unlike the emigrants of 1841, the majority of these people were supplied with everything necessary for the journey and carried surplus goods for trade in California; their equipment was of the best. Reed had built a very large and comfortable wagon having a double deck for sleeping quarters. It had two side entrances, unlike the ordinary prairie schooner, and was equipped with a cook stove and every convenience for traveling. It was soon known along the trail as the "Pioneer Palace Car."

An idea of the equipment necessary for a journey across the plains might be of interest here, and the following from Judge Thornton's "Oregon and California" will give the reader an excellent invoice of what these wagons contained:

"Advice to emigrants—

"All persons ought to use great caution in forming their connections. No partnership by which the rights of property are mingled, ought to be

³⁷ Lieutenant in Company H, California Volunteers, under Capt. Jacob, his traveling companion. Appointed alcalde of San Francisco by Gen. Kearney, serving from February until May, 1847. Author of "What I Saw in California," or "Rocky Mountain Adventures."

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made, if it can be avoided. If this cannot be avoided, at least, those with whom such connections are formed, should be well known to be persons of principle; for it is certain that the toils and everyday occurrences of the way will furnish the severest tests of character—tests so thorough and searching, that every thing, but the genuine gold, will be consumed in the furnace. These remarks, and others of a like character, are made with a view to practical usefulness. . . .

Emigrants ought to procure strong, well ironed, light wagons, made of thoroughly seasoned timber. The tongue should be a falling one, and the hounds should be thoroughly braced, above, below, and at the sides, with iron. The bed should be made of three-quarter inch plank, and also be well ironed, having strong shoulders on the under side to prevent becoming displaced in ascending and descending steep mountains. Each wagon ought to have at least four yokes of strong, healthy, well-broken oxen, with long straight legs, and from four to six years old. Their yokes should be strong, but not unnecessarily heavy, and they ought to work easily upon the neck. They should also be provided with iron bow keys, secured to the yoke by means of a light chain. Each wagon ought to be provided with about one dozen extra bows, made of hickory.

"Too much caution cannot be observed in the weight of the load. No furniture, and but few cooking utensils ought to be taken. The tableware should be tin, and the camp kettles should be made of sheet iron. These ought all to be made in sets, so as to fit into each other for the purpose of economizing space. Little else ought to be taken, than bed-clothing (without the beds, but buffalo robes instead), an abundance of ordinary wearing apparel for use in the country, but buckskin for use upon the journey; and a circular tent. This tent is preferable to any other form, because it can be put up with one pole.

"To this should be added for each adult: 100 pounds flour; 100 pounds butter crackers; 100 pounds bacon sides—no hams; 50 pounds dried beef; 50 pounds kiln-dried corn meal; 20 pounds rice; 25 pounds beans; 1 light rifle, having a percussion lock, and carrying about 40 balls to the pound; 1 revolving, or Colt's pistol; 25 pounds lead; 12 pounds best rifle powder; 1 butcher-knife; 1 small tomahawk—with the nerve to use them, not rashly, but effectively, when necessary. Green goggles should be provided, to protect the eyes from the otherwise almost intolerable dust.

"The provisions should be stored in half-inch pine boxes, of a uniform height, and corresponding in length with the width of the wagon bed. Wearing apparel, bed clothing, etc., ought to be stowed in sacks (water-proof, if possible), to avoid the unnecessary and often fatal weight of boxes and trunks.

"To each wagon there ought to be an ax; a drawing knife; a hand-saw, a set of augers; a gimlet; a hammer; about four pounds of assorted wrought nails; about forty pounds of tallow; and fifteen pounds of black lead."

Thornton has also left a very vivid picture of Independence, Missouri, gathering place for all emigrants bound for Oregon, California or Santa Fe. He says:

"The town of Independence was at this time a great Babel upon the border of the wilderness. Here might be seen the African slave with his shining black face driving his six-horse team of blood-red bays . . . In one street, just driving out of town, was an emigrant, who, having completed all his preparations, was about entering upon the great prairie wilderness; whistling as though his mouth had been made for nothing else . . . Here might be seen the indolent dark-skinned Spaniard smoking a cigar as he leans against the sunny side of a house. He wears a sharp conical hat with a red band; a blue round-about, with little brass buttons; his duck pantaloons are open at the side as high as the knee, exhibiting his white cotton drawers between his knee and the top of his low half-boots. Santa Fe wagons were coming in, having attached to them eight or ten mules, driven by Spaniards, some by Americans resembling Indians, some by negroes, and others by persons of all possible crosses between these various races; each showing in his dress as well as his face some distinctive characteristic of his blood and race—the dirty poncho always marking the Spaniard. The traders had been out to Santa Fe, having sold their goods in exchange for gold dust, dollars, and droves of mules, were then daily coming in; the dilapidated and muddy condition of their wagons, and wagon-sheets, and the sore backs of their mules, all giving evidence of the length and toil of the journey they had performed and were now about to terminate. Merchants were doing all in their power to effect the sale of supplies to emigrants. Some of the emigrants were hurrying to and fro, looking careworn, and many of them sad, as though the cloud had not yet passed away, that had come over their spirits, as they tore themselves from friends and scenes around which had clustered the memories of the heart. One was seen just starting, calling out to his oxen, and cracking his whip as though the world was at his control. Although some four or five children were in the wagon crying in all possible keys, he drove on, looking cheerful and happy, as though perfectly sure that he was going to a country where the valleys flowed with milk and honey. Behind the wagon, with her nose almost over the end-board, an old mare slowly and patiently stepped along, evincing as much care as though she knew that she was carrying mother and the baby, and therefore must not stumble on that account."

All the country west of the Mississippi was then Indian land. No white men attempted to cultivate it, except a few acres at the Shawnee Mission. For several days the westbound emigrants traveled the Santa Fe Trail, which for a considerable distance was identical with the Oregon Trail. The Kansas river was crossed on a ferry, operated by a Frenchman and his half-breed wife. From that point on there were no more ferries,



Near the center of the picture is the location of the grave of Mrs. Sarah Keyes. Located by Mr. J. G. Ellenbecker, at the crossing of the Big Blue River near Schroyer, Kansas. (Photo by Alice Riddle Bohnenblust, 1929.)



NAOMI PIKE FALLS

Named after a survivor of the Donner party, Mrs. Naomi Pike Schenck, still living at the Dalles, Oregon (1929). Alcove Spring breaks out beneath the ledge at the foot of these falls. Here James F. Reed and many others carved their names in 1846. (Photo by Raymond L. Ellenbecker, Marysville, Kansas)

and no white habitations of any kind until Ft. Laramie was reached.

At the crossing of the Big Blue river, just above its junction with the Little Blue, near what is now Schroyer, Kansas, the water was found to be very high, and the emigrants decided to wait a few days until it was safe to cross. While camped here, Mrs. Sarah Keyes, mother of Mrs. James F. Reed, for whom the big comfortable wagon had been built, was taken sick and died. She was buried near the trail, on a knoll under a large oak tree, and the grave marked with a headstone. The ancient oak has since disappeared, and the headstone was removed several years ago by a survivor of the Donner party, but the location of the grave is still remembered by Mr. J. G. Ellenbecker, a pioneer resident of Marysville, Kansas.

A half mile or so from this spot the emigrants found a beautiful spring breaking out from the side of the rocky creek bed, which they named Alcove Spring, carving the name in the rock, where it may still be seen. James F. Reed also carved his name and the date on a rock above the spring. Many others left their names at this place, but erosion has since caused part of the ledge to fall, carrying with it these records, which now lie broken and scattered along the stream.³⁸

Crossing the Big Blue, the emigrants followed the Little Blue to the Platte river. Hastings had represented the road to California as being plentifully supplied with water and grass for the sustenance of the cattle enroute, and depicted the ease with which buffalo might be killed to supply meat. In his "Oregon and California in 1848" J. Quinn Thornton, speaking of this, says:

"Lansford W. Hastings, who, if an opinion may be formed from the many untruths contained in his 'Emigrant's Guide to Oregon and California,' is the Baron Munchausen of travelers in these countries, says, at page 8 of his book: 'Having been a few days among the buffalo and their horses having become accustomed to these terrific scenes, even the green-horn is enabled not only to kill the buffalo with expertness, but he is also frequently seen driving them to the encampment, with as much indifference as he used formerly to drive his domestic cattle about his own fields, in the land of his nativity. Giving the buffalo rapid chase for a few minutes, they become so fatigued

³⁸ Grave and spring located in 1929 by Alice Riddle Bohnenblust of Manhattan, through the assistance of Mr. John G. Ellenbecker.



"ALCOVE SPRING"

Cut in the rock above Alcove Spring by the Donner Party in 1846.



Carving on a rock at Alcove Spring: "J. F. Reed, 26 May, 1846."
(Photographs by Raymond L. Ellenbecker, Marysville, Kansas)

and completely exhausted that they are driven from place to place with as little difficulty as our common cattle. Both the grown buffalo and the calves are very frequently driven in this manner to the encampment and slaughtered."

But the emigrants soon found that the great shaggy beasts of the plains were not quite so easily captured. The first buffalo were sighted soon after the train reached the Platte, and oxen and wagons were left ungarded on the prairie while the excited men raced after the half dozen animals which had been seen in the distance, expecting to accomplish their slaughter in a few moments. Some of the men were not able to return until the next day, having lost their way and worn out their horses.

James F. Reed had brought with him a racing mare which he prized very highly. Considering himself a "green-horn" he did not follow the buffalo on the first day, but remained with the wagons to observe the success of the other hunters, some of whom had had previous experience. The following letter written by him to his brother-in-law and printed in the *Sangamo Journal* on July 30, 1846, gives an interesting account of his experiences hunting buffalo: ³⁹

South Fork of the Nebraska, Ten Miles from the Crossings.

Tuesday, June 16, 1846.

Today, at nooning, there passed, going to the States, seven men from Oregon, who went out last year. One of them was well acquainted with Messrs. Ide, and Caden Keys—the latter of whom he says went to California. They met the advance Oregon caravan about 150 miles west of Ft. Larimore, and counted in all for California and Oregon (excepting ours), four hundred and seventy-eight wagons. There is in our train 40 wagons, which make 518 in all; and there is said to be twenty yet behind.

Tomorrow we cross the river, and by our reckoning will be 200 miles from Fort Larimore, where we intend to stop and repair our wagon wheels; they are nearly all loose, and I am afraid we will have to stop sooner if there can be found wood suitable to heat the tire. There is no wood here, and our women and children are now out gathering "Buffalo chips" to burn in order to do the cooking. These "chips" burn well.

So far as I am concerned, my family affairs go on smoothly, and I have nothing to do but hunt, which I have done with great success. My first appearance on the wilds of the Nebraska as a hunter, was on the 12th inst., when I returned to camp with a splendid two year old Elk, the first and only one killed by the caravan as yet. I picked the Elk I killed, out of eight of the largest I ever beheld, and I do really believe there was one in the gang as large as the horse I rode. We have had two Buffalo killed. The men

³⁹ This letter was carried east by James Clyman.

that killed them are considered the best buffalo hunters on the road—perfect "stars." Knowing that Glaucus could beat any horse on the Nebraska, I came to the conclusion that as far as buffalo killing was concerned, I could beat them. Accordingly yesterday I thought to try my luck. The old buffalo hunters and as many others as they would permit to be in their company, having left the camp for a hunt, Hiram Miller,⁴⁰ myself and two others, after due preparation, took up the line of march. Before we left, every thing in camp was talking that Mr. so and so, had gone hunting, and we would have some choice buffalo meat. No one thought or spoke of the two Sucker hunters, and none but the two asked to go with us. Going one or two miles west of the old hunters on the bluffs, and after riding about four miles, we saw a large herd of buffalo bulls. I went for choice young meat, which is the hardest to get, being fleeter and better wind. On we went towards them as coolly and calmly as the nature of the case would permit. And now, as perfectly green as I was I had to compete with old experienced hunters, and remove the stars from their brows, which was my greatest ambition, and in order too, that they might see that a Sucker had the best horse in the company, and the best and most daring horseman in the caravan. Closing upon a gang of ten or twelve bulls, the word was given, and I was soon in their midst, but among them there was none young enough for my taste to shoot, and upon seeing a drove on my right I dashed among them, with Craddock's pistol in hand—(a fine instrument for Buffalo hunters on the plains)—selected my victim and brought him tumbling to the ground, leaving my companion far behind. Advancing a little further, the plains appeared to be one living, moving mass of bulls, cows and calves. The latter took my eye, and I again put spur to Glaucus and soon found myself among them, and for the time being defied by the bulls, who protected the cows and calves. Now I thought the time had arrived to make one desperate effort, which I did by reining short up and dashing into them at right angles. With me it was an exciting time, being in the midst of a herd of upwards of a hundred head of buffalo alone, entirely out of sight of my companions. At last I succeeded in separating a calf from the drove, but soon there accompanied him three large bulls, and in a few minutes I separated two of them. Now having a bull that would weigh about 1200 lbs., and a fine large calf at full speed, I endeavored to part the calf from the bull without giving him Paddy's hint, but could not accomplish it. When I would rein to the right where the calf was, the bull would immediately put himself between us. Finding I could not separate on decent terms, I gave him one of Craddock's which sent him reeling. And now for the calf without pistol being loaded. Time now was important—and I had to run up and down hill at full speed loading one of my pistols. At last I loaded, and soon the chase ended. Now I had two dead and a third mortally wounded and dying. After I had disposed of my calf I rode to a small mound a short distance off to see if Hiram and the others were in sight. I sat down, and while sitting I counted 597 buffalo within sight. After a while Miller

⁴⁰ From Springfield, Ill. Crossed the Sierras with Edwin Bryant before snow fell. Returned to rescue the survivors of the Donner party.

and one of the others came up. We then got some water from a pond near by, which was thick with mud from the buffaloes tramping in it. Resting awhile the boys then wanted to kill a buffalo themselves. I pointed out to them a few old bulls about a mile distant. It was understood that I was not to join in the chase, and after accompanying the boys to the heights where I could witness the sport, they put out at full speed. They soon singled out a large bull, and I do not recollect of ever having laughed more than I did at the hunt the boys made. Their horses would chase well at a proper distance from the bull. As they approached he would come to a stand and turn for battle. The horses would then come to a halt, at a distance between the boys and the buffalo of about 40 yards. They would thus fire away at him, but to no effect. Seeing that they were getting tired of the sport and the bull again going away, I rode up and got permission to stop him if I could. I put spurs to Glaucus and after him I went at full speed. As I approached the bull turned around to the charge. Falling back and dashing towards him with a continued yell at the top of my lungs I got near enough to let drive one of my pistols. The ball took effect, having entered behind the shoulders and lodged in his lungs. I turned in my saddle as soon as I could to see if he had pursued me, as is often the case after being wounded. He was standing nearly in the place where he received the shot, bleeding at the nostrils, and in a few seconds dropped dead. I alighted and looped my bridle over one of his horns. This Glaucus objected to a little, but a few gentle words with a pat of my hand she stood quiet and smelled him until the boys came up. Their horses could not be got near him. Having rested, we commenced returning to the place where I killed the last calf. A short distance off we saw another drove of calves. Again the chase was renewed, and soon I laid out another fine calf upon the plains. Securing as much of the meat of the calves as we could carry, we took up the line of march for the camp, leaving the balance for the wolves, which are very numerous. An hour or two's ride found us safely among our friends, the acknowledged hero of the day, and the most successful buffalo hunter on the route. Glaucus was closely examined by many today, and pronounced the finest nag in the caravan. Mrs. R. will accompany me in my next buffalo hunt, which is to come off in a few days.

"The face of the country here is very hilly, although it has the name of 'plains.' The weather rather warm—thermometer ranging in the middle of the day at about 90, and at night 45.

The Oregon people tell me that they have made their claims at the head of Puget Sound, and say that the late exploration has made the northeast, or British side of the Columbia, far superior to the Willamette valley, in quality and extent of territory.

"Our teams are getting on fine so far. Most of the emigrants ahead have reduced their teams. The grass is much better this year throughout the whole route than the last.

"Respectfully your brother,

"Jas. W. Keys, Esq." ⁴¹

"JAMES F. REED.

⁴¹ From the Sangamo Journal, courtesy Illinois State Historical Library.

The following letter from Mrs. George Donner, also printed in the Sangamo Journal, July 23, 1846, gives an interesting description of the daily life of the emigrants:

Near the Junction of the North and South Platte,
June 16th, 1846.

"My Old Friend:—We are now on the Platte, 200 miles from Fort Larimere. Our journey so far, has been pleasant. The roads have been good, and food plentiful. The water for a part of the way has been indifferent; but at no time have we suffered for it. Wood is now very scarce, but "Buffalo chips" are excellent—they kindle quick and retain heat surprisingly. We had this evening Buffalo steak broiled upon them that had the same flavor they would have had on hickory coals.

We feel no fear of Indians. Our cattle graze quietly around our encampment unmolested. Two or three men will go hunting twenty miles from camp; and last night two of our men laid out in the wilderness rather than ride their horses after a hard chase. Indeed if I do not experience something far worse than I yet have done, I shall say the trouble is all in getting started.

Our waggons have not needed much repair; but I cannot yet tell in what respect they could be improved. Certain it is they cannot be too strong. Our preparation for the journey, in some respects might have been bettered. Bread has been the principal article of food in our camp. We laid in 150 lbs. of flour and 75 lbs. of meat for each individual, and I fear bread will be scarce. Meat is abundant. Rice and beans are good articles on the road—corn-meal, too, is acceptable. Linsey dresses are the most suitable for children. Indeed if I had one it would be comfortable. There is so cool a breeze at all times in the prairie that the sun does not feel as hot as one would suppose.

We are now 450 miles from Independence. Our route at first was rough and through a timbered country which appeared to be fertile. After striking the prairie we found a first rate road; and the only difficulty we had has been crossing creeks. In that, however, there has been no danger. I never could have believed we could have travelled so far with so little difficulty. The prairie between the Blue and Platte rivers is beautiful beyond description. Never have I seen so varied a country—so suitable for cultivation. Everything was new and pleasing. The Indians frequently come to see us, and the chiefs of a tribe breakfasted at our tent this morning. All are so friendly that I cannot help feeling sympathy and friendship for them. But on one sheet what can I say?

"Since we have been on the Platte we have had the river on one side, and the ever varying mounds on the other—and have travelled through the bottom lands from one to two miles wide with little or no timber. The soil is sandy, and last year, on account of the dry season, the emigrants found grass here scarce. Our cattle are in good order, and where proper care has been taken none has been lost. Our milch cows have been of great service—indeed, they have been of more advantage than our meat. We have plenty of butter and milk.

We are commanded by Capt. Russell—an amiable man. George Donner is himself yet. He crows in the morning, and shouts out "Chain up, boys! Chain up!" with as much authority as though he was "something in particular." John Denton is still with us—we find him a useful man in camp. Hiram Miller and Noah James are in good health and doing well. We have of the best people in our company, and some too, that are not so good.

Buffalo show themselves frequently. We have found the wild tulip, the primrose, the lupine, the ear-drop, the larkspur, and creeping holy-hock, and a beautiful flower resembling the bloom of the beech-tree, but in bunches as big as a small sugar-loaf, and of every variety of shade to red and green. I botanize and read some, but cook a "heap" more.

"There are 420 waggons, as far as we have heard, on the road between here and Oregon and California.

"Give our love to all enquiring friends—God bless them.

Yours truly,

"MRS. GEORGE DONNER." ⁴²

A majority of the wagons in Col. Russell's train traveled together until they reached Ft. Laramie. Here Edwin Bryant and a party of nine, including Col. Russell himself, decided to trade their wagons and oxen for mules in order to make better time, and from then on the train was known as the Donner party, under the leadership of George Donner.

Slight mention is made by any of the members of the Donner party of the incidents surrounding the "horse trade" at Ft. Laramie. But it so happened that Francis Parkman, a young man just out of college and yearning for adventure, arrived at the fort just after the trade had been consummated. His story of the occasion contains some illuminating details: ⁴³

"Pushing through a noisy, drunken crowd, I entered an apartment of logs and mud, the largest at the fort; it was full of men of various races and complexions, all more or less drunk. A company of California emigrants, it seemed, had made the discovery at this late day, that they had encumbered themselves with too many supplies for their journey. A part, therefore, they had thrown away, or sold at great loss, to the traders; but had determined to get rid of their very copious stock of Missouri whiskey, by drinking it on the spot. Here were maudlin squaws stretched on piles of buffalo robes; squalid Mexicans, armed with bows and arrows; Indians sedately drunk; long-haired Canadians and trappers, and American backwoodsmen in brown homespun, the well-beloved pistol and bowie-knife displayed openly at their sides. In the middle of the room a tall, lank man

⁴² From the Sangamo Journal, courtesy Illinois State Historical Library. Mrs. George Donner was among those who starved to death later at Donner lake.

⁴³ The Oregon Trail—Francis Parkman.

with a dingy broadcloth coat, was haranguing the company in the style of the stump orator. With one hand he sawed the air, and with the other clutched firmly a brown jug of whiskey, which he applied every moment to his lips, forgetting that he had drained the contents long ago. Richard formally introduced me to this personage, who was no less a man than Col. Russell, once the leader of the party. Instantly the colonel, seizing me, in the absence of buttons, by the leather fringes of my frock, began to define his position. His men, he said, had mutinied and deposed him; but still he exercised over them the influence of a superior mind; in all but the name he was yet their chief. As the colonel spoke I looked around on the wild assemblage, and could not help thinking that he was but ill fitted to conduct such men across the deserts to California. Conspicuous among the rest stood three young, tall men, grandsons of Daniel Boone. They had clearly inherited the adventurous character of that prince of pioneers; but I saw no signs of that quiet and tranquil spirit that so remarkably distinguished him."⁴⁴

Some time after leaving the train Bryant saw a letter sent with a Mr. Bonney, by Hastings, stating that he had just surveyed a new route which shortened the distance to California by two or three hundred miles and was much superior in every way to the Fort Hall road. The letter also spoke of opposition which might be encountered from the Mexican authorities and suggested that the emigrants cross the mountains in a large body.

The last newspapers Bryant had seen at Independence carried stories of General Zachary Taylor's operations against the Mexicans in the south, and the emigrants were naturally anxious about the reception they might receive upon their arrival. Hastings' letter, therefore, was timely and the advice seemed good. Circumstances were favoring his plan, conceived years before, and he hoped that the good will of the emigrants now enroute would soon assure him the presidency of California. His book had evidently accomplished the desired results and there were hundreds of wagons on the trail rolling toward the Pacific.

On July 16 Bryant's party camped with Hastings and Hudspeth on Black's Fork, where Hastings was awaiting the wagon trains. Bryant, however, was unfavorably impressed with their description of the new route and wrote letters to his friends in the rear warning them not to attempt the new Hastings Cutoff.

⁴⁴ This took place, not at Ft. Laramie proper, but at a smaller private trading post eight miles east, called by various names.

who had crossed the desert by that year previous, passed Bryant near the large drove of California mules which he saw. He strongly advised against the route that after considering the matter for some time, Bryant decided to follow of his belief that it was unsafe for him to engage Hudspeth to guide him part of



04901470168
OLUM SPRING
Foot of Hastings Pass in Cedar Mountain.
at Pilot Peak, 75 miles west.

Led by Hudspeth,⁴⁵ Bryant and eight companions pushed forward, and after many difficulties in getting down out of Weber canyon⁴⁷ into Salt Lake valley, eventually reached Fre-

⁴⁵ Bryant also passed Taplin, Reddick, and two other returning members of Fremont's party, who were coming east by the Fort Hall road, probably considering it much safer than the Salt Desert route which they had traveled westward the year previous.

⁴⁶ Accompanied by Ferguson, Kirkwood and Minter, three young men belonging to the Young and Harlan party.

⁴⁷ Instead of following his own trail over the mountains and down through Emigration Canyon, Hudspeth guided Bryant directly to Salt Lake valley through Weber canyon, a nearer but much more difficult route, and a route of which he knew absolutely nothing.

mont's old camp of the previous year, on what is now called City Creek, where Salt Lake City stands. Crossing the valley and the Jordan river (then called the Utah Outlet), they followed the shore of the lake as Fremont had done, and on August 1 crossed Skull valley and camped at the foot of the trail which Fremont had taken over Cedar mountain, on the eastern edge of the Salt Desert.

Here, at the foot of the ridge, they found damp sand in the bottom of the gully, and scooped out a hole. Enough water seeped into this hole to supply their immediate wants, but it was very brackish, and there was not enough for the mules. Their precautions for crossing the seventy-five miles of salt desert which lay before them were very simple. A small powder keg holding three or four pints, the only vessel in the whole party which would hold water, was filled with coffee made from the brackish water of the spring. This was the emergency supply for nine men.

Being now ready for the attempt they arose very early the next morning and climbed the ridge. Arriving at the summit, Hudspeth pointed out the way they were to take, and after advising them to "ride like hell," returned to Skull valley to explore a route further south. From here on the party was without a guide, and the valley was so full of smoke from fires in the mountains, that they could not see Pilot Peak on the opposite side.

Bryant states that so far as he knew, this route had only been taken twice previously, referring to Fremont and Hastings. He had not heard of Jedediah Smith's crossing, and he did not learn about the Bartleson party until after his arrival in California.⁴⁸ After parting with Hudspeth, Bryant's party descended the ridge and struck a little north of west across the Salt Desert, finding traces of Fremont's trail here and there.

Edwin Bryant was a keen observer and an entertaining writer, and his description of the Salt Desert is the best to be found anywhere. He says:

"Here we had a view of the vast desert plain before us, which, as far as the eye could penetrate, was of a snowy whiteness, and resembled a scene

⁴⁸ Smith crossed further to the south; Bartleson circled the northern end, then turned south to Pilot Peak.



JAMES M. HUDSPETH

Assisted Hastings in diverting emigration to California in 1846

FROM HISTORY OF SOLANO COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

of wintry frosts and icy desolation. Not a shrub or object of any kind rose above the surface for the eye to rest upon. It was a scene which excited mingled emotions of admiration and apprehension. A narrow valley or depression in the surface of the plain, about five miles in width,^{48a} displayed so perfectly the wavy and frothy appearance of highly agitated water, that Colonel Russell and myself both simultaneously exclaimed, 'We must have taken a wrong course and struck another arm of Great Salt Lake.' But soon, upon a more calm and scrutinizing inspection, we discovered that what represented so perfectly the onrushing waters was moveless, and made no sound! The illusion soon became manifest to all of us, and we laughed heartily at those who were first to be deceived.

"We now entered upon the hard smooth plain we had just been surveying with so much interest. Beyond this we crossed what appeared to have been the beds of several small lakes, the waters of which have evaporated, thickly encrusted with salt, and separated from each other by small mound-shaped elevations of a white sandy or ashy earth, so imponderous that it has been driven by the action of the winds into these heaps, which are constantly changing their positions and their shapes. Our mules waded through these ashy undulations, sometimes sinking to their knees, creating a dust that rose above and hung over us like a dense fog.

"The mirage here displayed its wonderful illusions in a perfection and with a magnificence surpassing any presentation of the kind I had previously seen. Lakes, dotted with islands and bordered by groves of gently waving timber, whose tranquil and limpid waves reflected their sloping banks and the shady islets in their bosoms, lay spread out before us, inviting us, by their illusory temptations, to stray from our path and enjoy their cooling shades and refreshing waters. These fading away as we advanced, beautiful villas, adorned with edifices, and surrounded by gardens, shaded walks, parks and stately avenues, would succeed them. These melting from our view as before, in another place a vast city with countless columned edifices of marble whiteness, and studded with domes, spires and turreted towers, would rise upon the horizon of the plain, astonishing us with its stupendous grandeur and sublime magnificence. But it is vain to attempt a description of these singular and extraordinary phenomena. Neither prose nor poetry nor the pencil of the artist can adequately portray their beauties. The whole distant view around at this point, seemed like the creations of a sublime and gorgeous dream, or the effect of enchantment.

"About eleven o'clock we struck a vast white plain, uniformly level and utterly destitute of vegetation or any sign that shrub or plant had ever existed above its snow-white surface. Pausing a few moments to rest our mules and moisten our mouths and throats from the scant supply of beverage in our powder keg, we entered upon this appalling field of sullen and hoary desolation. It was a scene so entirely new to us—so frightfully forbidding in its aspects, that all of us, I believe, though impressed with its sublimity,

^{48a} Just west of Grayback mountain, a low volcanic ridge; this plain is now covered with a growth of stunted greasewood.

felt a slight shudder of apprehension. Our mules seemed to sympathize with us in the prevailing sentiment, and moved forward with reluctance, several of them stubbornly setting their faces for a countermarch. For fifteen miles the surface of this plain is so compact that the feet of our animals left but little if any impression for the guidance of future travelers. Soon a cloud arose from the south, accompanied by distant peals of thunder, and a furious wind rushing across the plain and filling the whole atmosphere with fine particles of salt, drifting it in heaps like newly fallen snow. Our eyes became nearly blinded and our throats choked with the saline matter, and the very air we breathed tasted of salt.

"During the subsidence of this tempest there appeared upon the plain one of the most extraordinary phenomena, I dare to assert, was ever witnessed. I had dismounted and was walking several rods in front of the party. Diagonally, in front, appeared the figures of a number of men and horses. Some of these figures were mounted and others appeared to be marching on foot. Their faces were turned toward us and at first they appeared as if they were rushing down upon us. Their apparent distance was from three to five miles. But their size was not correspondent, for they seemed nearly as large as our own bodies, and consequently were of gigantic stature. At first view I supposed them to be a small party of Indians. I called to some of our party to hasten forward, as there were men in front, coming towards us. Very soon the fifteen or twenty figures were multiplied into three or four hundred, and appeared to be marching forward with the greatest action and speed. I then conjectured that they might be Capt. Fremont and his party returning to the United States. I spoke to Brown, who was nearest me, and asked him if he noticed the figures of men and horses in front. He assured me that he did, and that he had observed the same appearances several times previously, but that they had disappeared. It was then for the first time, so perfect was the deception, that I conjectured the probable fact that these figures were the reflection of our own images by the atmosphere, filled as it was with fine particles of crystallized matter. This phantom population, springing out of the ground as it were, and arraying itself before us as we traversed this dreary and heaven-condemned waste, although we were entirely convinced of the cause of the apparition, excited those superstitious emotions so natural to all mankind.⁴⁹

About five o'clock Bryant dropped behind the balance of the party, looking for water along the foot of what is now called Silver Island, a rocky ridge projecting into the salt plain. Returning about dark after an unfruitful excursion, he came upon the pack mule which carried all their provisions, with her pack hanging under her belly. Rearranging the load he proceeded as fast as the mules would go, and later on, after dark, came upon Buchanan, whose mule had refused to go further.

⁴⁹ Rocky Mountain Adventures—Bryant.

In company with the other two, however, the exhausted animal was persuaded to move slowly forward until ten o'clock, when they reached Pilot Peak and found the rest of the party encamped on a small stream flowing from a spring.

It would seem that one's first impulse upon finding fresh water after such a journey, would be to drink immediately and to excess. Bryant says that some hours previously he had suffered the extreme agonies of thirst, but that the craving for water had by this time become dulled so that he first unsaddled his mule and led it to water and grass before he thought of drinking himself. Worn down by the hard day's travel, there was no thought of cooking or eating, and they all threw themselves on the ground and immediately slept the sleep of the exhausted.

After resting one day at the spring, the party resumed their journey. Bryant says:

"We took a southwest course along the slope of the range of mountains under which we had encamped (Pilot Peak). After traveling about ten miles we struck a wagon trail which had evidently been made several years. From the indentations of the wheels, where the earth was soft, five or six wagons had passed here. The appearance of this trail in this desolate region was at first inexplicable; but I soon recollected that some five or six years ago an emigrating expedition to California was fitted out by Col. Bartleson, Mr. J. Chiles, and others, of Missouri, who, under the guidance of Captain Walker, attempted to enter California by passing around the southern terminus of the Sierra Nevada; and that they were finally compelled to abandon their wagons and everything they had, and did not reach their destination until they had suffered incredible hardships and privations. This, it appeared to me, was evidently their trail; and old as it was, and scarcely perceivable, it was nevertheless some gratification to us that civilized human beings had passed here before, and left their mark upon the barren earth behind them. My conjectures, above stated, have been subsequently confirmed by a conversation with Mr. Chiles. Following this old trail some two or three miles, we left it on the right."

This account of Bryant's confirms the record contained in John Bidwell's diary, under date of Sept. 13, 1841, where he speaks of traveling "between salt plains on the east and high mountains on the west." But Bryant has confused Chiles' first and second expedition. With Bartleson and Bidwell, J. B. Chiles passed Pilot Peak in 1841, making the trail which Bryant found there. Joseph Walker, however, was not a member of

that expedition. Walker was hired by Chiles in 1843 to guide his wagons by the Raft River route to California through Walker Pass in the Sierras, and by taking that route did not come within sight of Pilot Peak.

Bryant and his party were without a guide, and it seems strange that he did not follow the Bartleson wagon trail, which passed westward over the southern slope of Pilot Peak. Instead he went further south to a lower pass, paralleled the wagon trail across the next wide valley, and apparently never saw it again, although he certainly must have crossed it once more. If he had followed it for a day's travel, he would have found the abandoned wagons of the Bartleson party at the foot of Spruce mountain on the western side of Steptoe valley.

Crossing the Toano range through Silver Zone pass, Bryant and his friends turned northwest, reaching the Humboldt river over the same route Fremont had taken, which was also Hastings' eastbound route. Following the river they eventually reached the Sierras, which they crossed to Sutter's Fort, arriving there on September 1, 1846—the first to reach California that year.⁵⁵

* * *

To Bryant's excellent description of the desert it might be well to add some further facts, so that the reader will have a better idea of what the emigrants had to contend with. Aside from the great beds of solid salt, four feet thick, which were not discovered by these early emigrants, the desert consists chiefly of gray mud to an unknown depth, highly impregnated with salt. The moisture which falls here during the winter and early spring is absorbed by this mud. When the hot winds of summer blow across these salt flats evaporation sets in, but each particle of evaporated water leaves its particle of salt on the surface. Soon a crust is formed which retards further evaporation, and the balance of the moisture is "sealed" in the mud below. Even in the very driest seasons the greater part of this desert is still soft beneath the crust. The heavy narrow-tired

⁵⁵ Other members of the Bryant party were: John C. Buchanan, Bryant's secretary while alcalde of San Francisco; R. I. Jacobs, Captain of Company H, California Volunteers, 1847; Wm. H. Russell, founder of the Pony Express; Hiram Miller, member of the second Donner relief party; James McClary, Wm. H. Nuttall, Brookey and Brown.

wagons of the emigrants cut deeply into this mud, but since the surface is absolutely level, there was no erosion, and the ruts were gradually filled with the finer sediments deposited by occasional storms, leaving the surface perfectly smooth. The old wagon tracks are still plainly visible after more than eighty years, as parallel lines of lighter colored sediment. (See photo page 157).

Nearly every year Salt Lake City experiences a "salt storm," which leaves every window and every automobile covered with a thin coating of salt. This is said to be caused by a high wind passing over the lake, which picks up the salt water and drops it again on the city. The real cause, however, is more simple. When evaporation sets in on the Salt Desert in summer, the wind heaps up some of the fine particles of salt brought to the surface. When the high wind preceding a storm strikes this loose salt, it is carried up into the atmosphere in an immense white cloud. Rain, falling through this cloud of fine salt, brings it down again, often many miles away. Bryant's description makes this easy to understand.

Spring of 1846

from Lawrence W M H Russell Party

included:

Missouri
Edwin Bryant

May 19, 1846

9 wagons of Geo + Jacob Donner from
Illinois joined this train. James F Reed
was also in this group. Now the total was

46 wagons

Samuel C Young + George Harker
were also invited, but they declined.

Jesse Boone = Dr. son of Donnell were
Judge L Quinn Thornton also in this group

James F Reed built 2 level prairie